The Sins of Sor Juana

Research Requirements

**Production History**

There were three pertinent reviews and source information regarding The Sins of Sor Juana, which I found useful in my research. The premiere in 1999 at the George Mason University Theatre, Washington D.C., the 2004 production at the Mexican Fine Arts Center in Chicago, and the 2009 Spring production at Northwestern UniversityThe targeted exploration of past productions yielded insightful and beneficial contributions to my production. Through the process of researching the production history, I analyzed how previous directors and designers approached the script. I discovered other directors also sought the passionate fire, which Zacarais’ script ignites and acknowledged the otherworldly feel to the piece. The script is dreamlike and has a beat all of its own. The comment on the 1999 premiere production in the Washington Post spoke about, “…a definite feel for a time and place long ago and far away.” (Triplett) The Chicago Tribune labels the play an, “almost Shakespearean work” (Vanasco). There is an ethereal quality to the play and these productions led me to strive for that aspect in mine. Panels of sharks tooth scrim were painted with text from Sor Juana’s 1680’s publication of her collected works and hung as walls from which the world of the court entered and exited. Her words were also etched upon the robes of the monks. The 2009 production at Northwestern University provided my students and myself access to their production archives. Henry Godniz, director, based their production palette upon the austere works of 17th century Spanish painter, Diego Velásquez. Godniz spoke about how “life in the court was very strict – they would seem almost corseted, bound, and in very little color.” (Godinez). I agreed with this color palette, but I only for the convent scenes – a monochromatic world of grays, blacks, and off-whites. The flashbacks to the court where full of life and color to underscore the tension of the sexual and intellectual conflict – the passion of Sor Juana as illustrated in other productions.

**Playwright Biographical Research**

Karen Zacarias, was in danger of being deported in 1995 in the midst of writing The Sins of Sor Juana. Though she had lived in the United States since the age of 10, her student visa was expiring and the orders were to go. “Nobel Laurates Elie Wiesel and Derek Walcott, her professor at Boston University, wrote letters supporting her position to stay in the United States, stating she was a burgeoning playwright of some worth.” (Beth Carney) Zacarias ‘own struggle to remain and have her voice heard is echoed in the pages of her play as Sor Juana fights for her intellectual rights. In an article in American Theatre, she talks about what inspired her to write The Sins of Sor Juana. “I started writing Sor Juana with the grandiose idea that I was introducing this noble character to a new audience that "needed" to know who she was. I had to figure out why I personally wanted to write about this woman who was doomed to be silenced. Then suddenly I realized that Sor Juana's story was very parallel to my grandmother's life story.” (Svich) To Zacarias, Sor Juana is just not a voice from the past, but a real person and, by comparing Sor Juana with her own life experiences, Zacarias creates a woman of depth –of high integrity and very human emotions. She tells a story with a universal theme – the struggle for artistic freedom and equality. Zacarias wanted Sor Juana known to a new audience. Zacarias sees and tells us that a voice that would not be silenced, will not be silenced. The research into Zacarias’ reasons and circumstances for writing the play brought clarifying choices into my design elements. I feel Sor Juana is bold and dynamic and researdch into Zacarias confirmed this. The principals of my color scheme, shapes and forms, etc, are based on the playwrights intent of a strong, sensual woman who influenced all those around her.

**Period Research**

In the 17th century world of New Spain a woman’s subordination was absolute. It was never a woman’s place to be smarter than her male counterparts. “Women were continually instructed that their spiritual and social worth resided above all else in their giving unstinting obedience to father or husband” (17th Century Life and Times) Women were not encouraged to be educated. Their place was by their husbands or in the church serving God. It was a patriarchal society ruled by kings and religion. Religion was an integral part of every day life – no matter what one’s station. . Colonial Spain possessed the treasures and wealth of the new world. There was a caste system where those of Spanish bloodlines were considered superior to those who were native or born of mixed marriages. Social morays governed the day. Children born out of wedlock were scorned and considered themselves sinful. Politics centered around the court and the church – each uneasily keeping a steady balance of power. It was the time of the Inquisition and one did not criticize or attempt to usurp the doctrines of the Catholic Church.